

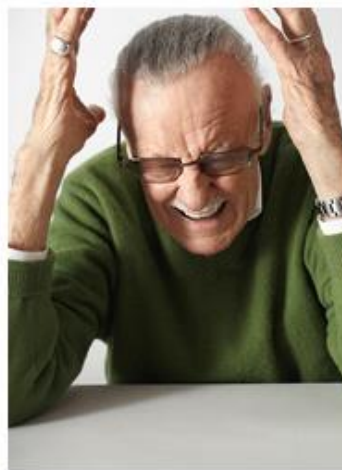


Playboy Interview: Stan Lee

By: David Hochman | March 19, 2014

UMV: 13,405,588 UMV | Circulation: 1,363,615

<http://www.playboy.com/playground/view/stan-lee-marvel-playboy-interview>



PLAYBOY INTERVIEW

STAN LEE

A candid conversation with the original genius behind Marvel Comics and most of the superheroes you've ever loved or watched on the big screen

At 91, Stan Lee is what you might call a superhero emeritus. His epic adventures are mostly behind him and his powers are on the wane. (He can't hear or see so well, and a pacemaker regulates his heart.) But the [comic-book](#) writer who dreamed up Spider-Man, the X-Men, the Hulk, Iron Man and the Fantastic Four still works five days a week, travels wherever convention geeks gather and tops each autograph with his trademark "Excelsior!"

The son of poor Jewish immigrants from Romania, Stanley Martin Lieber (he later shortened it legally) never became the novelist he aspired to be while growing up on New York's Upper West Side. But fantasizing about radioactive arachnids, magnetic force fields and vixens such as Black Widow gave him a great living and a legacy that will outlive us all.

In 1939 Lee's uncle helped get him an assistant's job at Timely Comics, a company the boss, Martin Goodman (a relative of Lee's), later renamed Marvel. Showing early promise providing text for Captain America, Lee was installed as a Marvel editor at the age of 18, an "interim" gig he ended up keeping until 1972. For much of that time Lee plodded away in the Marvel writers' bullpen to the point of burnout. Only after his wife, Joan, a British former model, pushed him to create characters "the way you've always wanted to" did Lee's career take off.

Between 1961 and 1965, in one of pop culture's most remarkable creative bursts, Lee, working with freelance artists including Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, created the key characters in what became known as the Marvel Revolution. (Kirby's estate would later sue for pieces of that action.) Superheroes were no longer two-dimensional goody-goodies but quirky, angst-ridden and flawed. The Fantastic Four bickered. The Hulk and the X-Men struggled with their alter egos. Even Spider-Man, a character who came to Lee—or so the story goes—as he observed a fly walking up a wall, was a wreck inside.

Today Lee's creations are enjoying their widest audiences ever. After declaring bankruptcy in 1996, Marvel powered back with blockbuster movies, digital entertainment and, yes, more comic books. Disney acquired the company for \$4.2 billion in 2009, though, surprisingly, Lee didn't see a dime of that. By then he had formed his own company, POW! Entertainment. But he will always be Mr. Marvel.

Contributing Editor David Hochman, who last interviewed [Sean Hannity](#), spent a couple of days with Lee at his Beverly Hills offices. "Stan has the sandpaper growl of a bygone era, but he's remarkably sharp, plugged in and quick with a comeback. We should all be as cool as Stan Lee at his age."

LEE: So Playboy wants to know all about my sex life?

PLAYBOY: If that's where you would like to begin.

LEE: It's interesting. Years and years ago the magazine was considering doing one of these interviews with me, but I guess it wasn't the time. One of your editors said, "We know Stan Lee. We love Stan Lee. Stan Lee is a friend of Hef's. But Spider-Man is more famous than Stan is." Does this mean I'm finally bigger than Spider-Man?

PLAYBOY: The case can certainly be made. The characters you created decades ago dominate pop culture. [Iron Man 3](#) was the highest-grossing film in 2013. Marvel's The Avengers was 2012's biggest. X-Men: Days of Future Past could easily rule 2014. Not to mention TV, publishing, merchandising and gaming. How do you account for the continued success of these vintage superheroes?

LEE: It's because I wrote them so magnificently, don't you think? Actually, I have a theory. May we become [philosophical](#)?

PLAYBOY: Please.

LEE: It's an extension of the fairy tales we read as kids. Or the monster stories or stories about witches and sorcerers. You get a little older and you can't bother with fairy tales and monster stories anymore, but I don't think you ever outgrow your love for things that are fantastic, that are bigger than you are—the giants or the creatures from other planets or people with superpowers who can do things you can't.



*I have no standing at
Marvel where I decide what
projects get made, and
certainly none at Disney,
which now owns Marvel.
Mostly I'm just a pretty face.*

The added appeal of so many of these characters is that they were extraordinary but ordinary at the same time. That made them relatable. The Fantastic Four had unusual powers, but they were also a kind of family with foibles. Mr. Fantastic, for instance, could be a real bore. And Spider-Man was like a lot of teenage boys—confused, troubled. He had problems trying to make his way in the world and coping with being a superhero. The Thing and the Hulk were disoriented monsters—monstrous freaks, as it were—which gave them a certain amount of pathos. The X-Men were magnificent misfits. Then you had Daredevil, who was blind but could do things better than most sighted people. I did not create Captain America, but I attempted to make him more than just a strongman who fought the bad guys. I tried to give him a personality and his own fears and hang-ups and frustrations. Or how about Doctor Strange? I love that guy, a surgeon whose hands get shattered in an accident. He has to struggle to find his way and eventually learns magic in the ancient mystical tradition. He becomes the most powerful magician the cosmos has ever known. They haven't made a Doctor Strange movie yet, but they will.

So you see, [comic books](#) to me are fairy tales for grown-ups. Iron Man, the Avengers, Spider-Man and all the rest are popular for the same reason “Jack and the Beanstalk” is still popular after a million years. They're good stories about characters that are like us but also larger than us. That's the end of my philosophy lesson. It should be carved in stone.

PLAYBOY: From a creative standpoint, what were you experiencing during that intense period from 1961 to 1965 when you wrote The Fantastic Four, The Amazing Spider-Man, The Avengers—which included the characters Thor, the Hulk, Iron Man and Loki—Daredevil and The X-Men, among others?

LEE: To be honest, I could have done it earlier; I could have done it later. It was only because my boss asked me to do it. For instance, after I had done Fantastic Four, Martin, my publisher, said, “Give me another bunch of heroes.” He also wasn't thrilled that our competition, DC Comics, had the Justice League. So I did what I knew how to do. I created another group of characters.

First I had to come up with an origin. How does this group get their superpowers? Well, the Fantastic Four had been clobbered by cosmic rays. The Hulk was hit with gamma rays. Incidentally, I had no idea what cosmic rays or gamma rays were, but they sounded good. And they were the only rays I knew. I had run out of rays, so what the hell was I going to do for this new group? I took the cowardly way out and said they were born that way; they're mutants. In fact I called them the Mutants. Martin hated the name, so we changed it to the X-Men. At a certain point we had every variety of superhero with every possible origin tale and power.

PLAYBOY: Yet somehow they all lived in New York City.

LEE: Oh, that was convenient for me since I lived there myself. To me, these characters existed only if I could picture them around town. Tony Stark, Iron Man, for example, was very wealthy and lived in a mansion on Central Park. The Fantastic Four lived in the Baxter Building, which was farther downtown. They could then guest star in one another's books. One day I wrote a story in which Spider-Man, who lived in Forest Hills, Queens, decides he's not making enough money being a superhero and thinks maybe he'll join the Fantastic Four. There might be a buck in it for him. So he goes to the Fantastic Four headquarters and swings into the window. He says, “I want to join you guys.” They say, “We're not looking for anybody.” So he doesn't join them.

I had fun with all these characters because I literally knew where they lived, as well as what their personalities were. All that was left for me to do was make up the villains, which was even more fun

than making up the heroes. Until I ran out of animal names, I was okay. There was the Lizard, the Scorpion, Doctor Octopus, the Vulture, the Rhino.

PLAYBOY: It sounds like fun, but the pressure must have been intense. By 1968 Marvel was putting out 50 million comic books a year.

LEE: Pressure is not the word. I was always on the precipice. If anything went wrong, I'd fall. You see, I was not only the head writer but I was also the editor. It was my responsibility to make sure the books were sent to the printer on time. If we ever missed a printing date, we had to pay for that printing time anyway, which would be thousands of dollars.

Some months we were doing 40, 50 books. And not only superheroes. You had all those other types too—My Romance, Her Romance, Their Romance. My publisher loved Westerns with the word kid in them, so I had Two-Gun Kid, Texas Kid, Rawhide Kid, every other kind of kid. In those days I was just grinding out stuff.

PLAYBOY: What's your role at Marvel today?

LEE: Mostly I'm just a pretty face they keep for the public. My entire career, I treated Marvel like one big ad campaign, with slogans like "Make mine Marvel," "Welcome to the Marvel age of comics" and so forth. After a while, I became Marvel's ambassador to the world. I've lectured in every city in the country probably two or three times. I've been to China, Europe, Japan, [Australia](#) and every place in between. Today, my main focus is my own company, POW! Entertainment, which stands for Purveyors of Wonder, and we have projects we're doing independent of Marvel. We have a television movie, another movie we're doing with partners in China, as well as one in India. We're doing a line of children's books and Stan Lee's Superhumans series on the web.

I have no standing at Marvel where I decide what projects get made or who gets hired, and certainly none at Disney, which now owns Marvel. I'm a guy they hire as a writer or producer and also to go to conventions and do things like that.

PLAYBOY: Just to be clear, you don't own any rights to the characters you created.

LEE: I never did. I was always a Marvel employee, a writer for hire and, later, part of management. My role at Marvel is strictly honorary. Marvel always owned the rights to these characters. If I owned them, I probably wouldn't be talking to you now.

PLAYBOY: Disney paid more than \$4 billion for Marvel a few years ago. Did you at least get a Tony Stark-like helicopter in the deal?

LEE: I'll tell you something that just happened. My daughter was looking at the internet the other day and read that Stan Lee has an estimated \$250 million. I mean, that's ridiculous! I don't have \$200 million. I don't have \$150 million. I don't have \$100 million or anywhere near that.

PLAYBOY: Don't you think you should?

LEE: No.

PLAYBOY: George Lucas created fewer characters but could buy a country now if he wanted.

LEE: Yeah, but George Lucas did it all by himself. He came up with the ideas. He produced the movies. He wrote and directed them and held the rights to the merchandising. It was all his. In my case I worked for the publisher. If the books didn't sell, the publisher went broke—and a lot of publishers did go broke. Marvel took a gamble doing what it did. The artist and writer took a gamble hitching up with the publisher by hoping the books would sell.

You have to understand that growing up during the Depression, I saw my parents struggling to pay the rent. My father was always unemployed, and when he did have a job, he was a dress cutter. Not very much money there. I was happy enough to get a nice paycheck and be treated well. I always got the highest rate; whatever Martin paid another writer, I got at least that much. It was a very good job. I was able to buy a house on Long Island. I never dreamed I should have \$100 million or \$250 million or whatever that crazy number is. All I know is I created a lot of characters and enjoyed the work I did.

PLAYBOY: One of the greatest Marvel characters has been Stan Lee. You appeared in the comic strips, in a column called Stan's Soapbox and in Hitchcock-like cameos in the Marvel movies.

LEE: I even played one character modeled after Hef, in Iron Man. They were all fun to do. The one I got the biggest kick out of was probably in the Fantastic Four movie when I wasn't invited to the wedding of Sue and Reed, and they wouldn't let me in. I said, "But I'm Stan Lee," and the security guy pushes me aside.

PLAYBOY: Where does the comic-book Stan Lee end and the real you begin?

LEE: Honestly, what you see is the real me, particularly if what you see is a wonderful, adorable, interesting, exciting kind of guy. Then, boy, they've got me pegged. Please say he said that with a laugh.

***I didn't know what to think when Robert Downey Jr.
was announced as Iron Man. I couldn't picture him.
To me Downey wasn't a superhero; he was Chaplin.***

PLAYBOY: Kidding aside, one issue dogs you and affects your legacy—the perception that you get too much credit for characters you created with artists such as Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko. You have gone out of your way to acknowledge their contributions and authorship, but the controversy lingers. Can anything be done to settle the situation and do right by these guys once and for all?

LEE: I don't know what you mean by doing right by them. I always tried to show them in the most favorable light, even in the credits. There was never a time when it just said "by Stan Lee." It was always "by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko" or "by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby." I made sure their names were always as big as mine.

As far as what they were paid, I had nothing to do with that. They were hired as freelance artists, and they worked as freelance artists. At some point they apparently felt they should be getting more money. Fine, it was up to them to talk to the publisher. It had nothing to do with me. I would have liked to have gotten more money too. I never made an issue of it. I got paid per page for what I wrote, the same rate as the other writers—maybe a dollar a page more.

If you ask me, should they have been paid more? Then you have to say, shouldn't John Romita have been paid more? Shouldn't Gil Kane have been paid more? Shouldn't John Buscema have? They were all great Marvel artists. In other words, if somebody draws a strip and it becomes successful, do you go back? I don't know. That's the reason I've never been a businessman and never want to be a businessman. I don't know how to deal with those things.

PLAYBOY: You were part of Marvel management for many years.

LEE: That's true. And twice, not once, I offered a job to Jack Kirby. I said to him, "Jack, why don't you work for Marvel with me?" I was the art director at the time. I said, "You be the art director. I'll just be the editor and head writer, and you'll have that security." He wouldn't do it. He didn't want to. I would have loved him to work side by side with me. I used to marvel at the way Jack drew. He would draw something as if it had appeared in his mind and he was just tracing what he had thought of already. I never saw a man draw as quickly as Jack did. "Come work with me, Jack," I said. But he said no. He didn't want a staff job. With him, as with Ditko, I don't see where they were unfairly treated.

PLAYBOY: Kirby died in 1994. Do you remember the last time you saw him?

LEE: I'll tell you, the last thing Jack Kirby said to me was very strange. I met him at a comic-book convention right before the end. He wasn't that well. He walked over and said, "Stan, you have nothing to reproach yourself about." He knew people were saying things about me, and he wanted to let me know I hadn't done anything wrong in his eyes. I think he realized it. Then he walked away. I went to his funeral, by the way.

PLAYBOY: What was that like?

LEE: Well, it was terrible. I mean, he shouldn't have died so young. [Editor's note: Kirby died at 76.] I stayed in the back row because I didn't want anybody to see me. It was Jack's funeral. His wife, Roz, saw me. She knew I was there. Then I left, and that was it. Jack was a great guy and so is Steve. I'm sorry anybody feels there's any acrimony. I loved them both.

PLAYBOY: Steve Ditko is in his 80s now but hasn't made a public appearance in decades. Have you talked to him?

LEE: I met him maybe 10 years ago. I was at the Marvel office. We talked for a while, very friendly. I said it would be great if we could do something together again. I would have liked that. I never knew why he quit in the first place. It might have had to do with the fact that I was trying to tell him how to do the stories. With the Green Goblin we didn't know who the character really was. I wanted him to turn out to be Harry Osborn's father. Ditko said, "No, I don't want it to be. It should be somebody we don't know." So I said, "Steve, the readers have been following the series for the longest time, waiting to find out who he is. If it's somebody they've never seen they'll be frustrated." Anyway, I couldn't convince him and he

certainly couldn't convince me, so that might have been what drove him away. But he never told me and we don't see each other anymore.

PLAYBOY: On another note, a company known as Stan Lee Media recently sued Disney for \$5 billion, claiming it was owed the rights to your characters. This must be irritating.

LEE: It is incredibly irritating, because people think it's me. I did have a company called Stan Lee Media, but it went belly-up. The fellow running it is now in jail. It was an unfortunate situation. For some reason people have spent years and God knows how much money claiming I gave Marvel the rights to the characters. Again, I never had the rights to the characters. The whole thing is based on sand. Unfortunately, I can't get them to stop using my name.

PLAYBOY: Let's shift gears. [Ben Affleck](#) got mixed reviews a decade ago when he played Daredevil. What do you think about him being the new Batman?

LEE: I think he's terrific. Daredevil wasn't as successful as some of our other movies, but I think it wasn't written or perhaps directed as I had conceived it. The movie is darker, and they made so much of him and the church. That wasn't the Daredevil I knew. But Ben ought to do a great job as Batman. People say he's too old. Listen, from my perspective, he's still a very young man.

PLAYBOY: Where do you stand on Tobey Maguire's Spider-Man versus Andrew Garfield's?

LEE: When I first saw Tobey Maguire in the role, I thought, Here's the absolute perfect Peter Parker. When I saw Andy Garfield in the role, I thought, Andy's the most perfect. They're both great and they're both different. It's not like they cast the first guy off the street for these parts. People much smarter than I am about these things are casting these movies. They do a fantastic job.

PLAYBOY: What did you think when Garfield raised the idea in an interview last year that Spider-Man might be gay?

LEE: Listen, I can't control what actors say or how they behave. I can only comment on how they act, and like I said, Andy's terrific in the role. I don't have a line in the sand about Spider-Man. I guess if he were fat and flabby and didn't look anything like a superhero, you might hear from me, but there's too much money invested in these films for them to goof around with casting or the basic conception of who these characters are.

PLAYBOY: Which actress has impressed you most in the Marvel movies?

LEE: Jessica Alba was the girl in Fantastic Four, right? She was terrific. I really liked her. Who was the girl in X-Men with the short hair, very pretty?

PLAYBOY: [Halle Berry](#).

LEE: Lovely girl. I spoke to her for a while and really enjoyed her performances.

PLAYBOY: Of all the women in the comic-book world, who would you have wanted to go on a date with?

LEE: I never thought of that. See, I'm going to tell you something you may not be aware of: They were fictitious characters.

PLAYBOY: But some were sexier than others.

LEE: To me, the sexiest of all was Mary Jane in Spider-Man. I loved the idea. The way I'd written it, Spider-Man's aunt May was continually trying to get Peter Parker to meet the niece of her next-door neighbor. "She's such a nice girl. I think you'd like her." Well, to a teenage boy, hearing she's a nice girl is the biggest turnoff in the world. Peter, as I remember, kept avoiding meeting her. One day I made it the last panel of the story. He couldn't avoid it anymore. He said, "All right, I'll meet her." He opens the door and there's this hot-looking babe who says to him, "Face it, tiger, you just hit the jackpot." I don't know why they didn't put that in the movie. I just love that whole idea. "Face it, tiger, you just hit the jackpot." He sees this sizzling girl, and he'd been expecting some drab nobody.

PLAYBOY: The Marvel bullpen was such a boys' club. You guys must have had fun behind the scenes thinking about which characters were having sex with each other and who had the biggest codpieces.

LEE: Obviously we always talked about Mr. Fantastic and how great he would be for any woman, with the ability to stretch the way he could. But that was about all.

PLAYBOY: These were colorful characters conceived in colorful times. Were psychedelics or other drugs involved?

LEE: I'm not aware that any of the artists took drugs. It would shock me to learn that Kirby, for instance, was taking drugs. Or John Romita or Gil Kane. These guys were family men, hardworking guys, and they were simply that talented. Almost any of them could have been major movie directors. When an artist draws a panel, he has the widest choice. He can make it a close-up shot, a long shot, an overhead shot, a strange angle, a head-on shot. And they would make these creative decisions quickly and under major deadline pressure. Drugs? I don't think they would have survived. They certainly never came into the office in a different mood, looking a little spaced out or whatever. And I definitely wasn't doing drugs. I was never into them, and I know nothing about them.

***People read into the fact that I called the character Mary Jane,
but I had no idea it was a nickname for marijuana.
I never understood why people take drugs. They can kill you.***

PLAYBOY: Did you ever try [marijuana](#)?

LEE: No. I hardly ever smoked a cigarette. I bought these thin cheroots because you didn't have to inhale. I would puff on them, but I eventually gave them up because I was burning holes in my sweaters. People read into the fact that I called the character Mary Jane, but honestly, I had no idea it was a nickname for marijuana. I never understood why people take drugs. They're habit forming and they can

kill you. I didn't need anything to pep me up or make me feel more creative, and I didn't need them to help me with women.

PLAYBOY: There's a curious rumor online that you and Mick Jagger would occasionally go to bars together to see who could pick up women faster and that often it wasn't Mick Jagger.

LEE: Oh, it's not true. But I will say, a woman will go with any recognizable celebrity even if you're the ugliest celebrity in the world. That's just the law of fame. I did pretty well in my day. I had a Buick convertible four-door Phaeton that used to impress the girls. But you can't compete with rock stars. I've spent time with Aerosmith and Alice Cooper and Kiss. Gene Simmons actually put his blood into a vat of ink so we could say the Kiss comic books we created were printed with his blood. That's the kind of thing girls are looking for.

PLAYBOY: You've been married to your wife, Joan, for almost 70 years. What's the secret to a lasting marriage?

LEE: Marrying the right girl. We get along fine even though we both have strong personalities. My wife, whom I adore, is half Irish and has a very hot temper. I remember years ago we were arguing over something and she got angry. She said, "I'll show you!" and picked up the Remington Noiseless Portable typewriter I'd used to write *The Fantastic Four* and *Spider-Man* and all the rest, and banged it against the floor. It shattered into a million pieces. I like to tease her and say, "Joanie, if we had that typewriter now, do you know what we could auction it off for?"

PLAYBOY: Do you have *Amazing Fantasy* #15, the comic book in which *Spider-Man* debuts, hidden in a vault somewhere?

LEE: No. I never collected them. In those days we didn't think of it. When we were doing these books we never knew the artwork or scripts would have any value. We were in a small office. The original pages were very big and thick, and a book then had, like, 48 or 64 pages. After the book was printed, the printer would send the original pages of artwork and all the color proofs back to us. We had no room for them. We gave everything away. Some kid would come up to deliver sandwiches from the drugstore and we'd say, "Hey, kid, on your way out, take these pages and throw them somewhere." If one of those guys had brains enough to save some stuff, he'd be a very lucky man right now.

PLAYBOY: Fewer kids read comic books today than they did in the heyday. Does that make you sad?

LEE: I didn't know they weren't. Really? See, I'm not much of a scholar about what's happening. I just do my own thing. But it's not only comic books. Everything's changing. Everything's being done on computer or iPhone or iPad. The whole language is changing. Words end up abbreviated because of texting.

PLAYBOY: Do you have any advice for comic-book-store owners?

LEE: If I were a comic-book-store owner, I'd be wondering how I could get into electronic comics, digital comics or anything else. It's not just comic-book-store owners I'm worried about. I'd be concerned if I owned any bookstore. But I don't know. I'm old-fashioned. I hope there will always be a little comic book for kids and teenagers and grown-ups to hold, because nothing replaces the experience of turning those pages, of smelling those pages. But yes, everything is changing. In 10 years we probably won't recognize this world. Thank goodness we have other media. It's what keeps these characters alive.

PLAYBOY: Let's talk about the new Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. television series. Is it close to your original conception?

LEE: It's a funny thing about S.H.I.E.L.D. I started it because there was a popular TV show at the time, *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, and I wanted to come up with a special group of my own. I called it the Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage, Law-Enforcement Division. I thought it was kind of cute. They've given the word new meaning now. To me, the greatest part about S.H.I.E.L.D. was Nick Fury, and I hope we get to see a lot of him on the show. He'd been in an earlier comic book of mine, *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos*, and when I retired him, I got so many letters asking where he went, I brought him back as a colonel. He was the toughest son of a bitch I ever created, and Kirby did a wonderful job with him.

PLAYBOY: Many people don't know that your younger brother, Larry Lieber, helped create Iron Man and other characters. How come he never got more acclaim?

LEE: Larry was always a good writer and a good artist. He could do almost anything I asked him to do. He scripted not only the first Iron Man but also the first Thor, and he still does the daily Spider-Man newspaper strips. The only problem is that Larry could be a perfectionist. It wasn't that he was faster or slower than other artists, but he had a hard time letting go of his drawings unless he was 100 percent satisfied with them. He always worked on things even after I said they were great. I think it just made the whole process a little harder for him.

PLAYBOY: Which Marvel character has surprised you the most in terms of its success?

LEE: Probably Iron Man. But much of that success is because of the movie. I didn't know what to think when Robert Downey Jr. was announced as Iron Man. I couldn't picture him. When I created the character, I kind of thought of Howard Hughes because he was an adventurer, an inventor, a millionaire in those days, and he was strange. To me Downey wasn't a superhero; he was Chaplin. But the instant I saw him I said, "He's Iron Man." I think it's the greatest bit of casting ever.

Of all the characters I've done, Iron Man is the most popular with women. I get it. He's a billionaire and he's handsome and glamorous, plus he needs somebody to look after him. He's got a weak heart. "Oh, if only I knew a man like that." We got more fan mail from women for that book than any other. And now the movie has made him our most popular character after Spider-Man.

PLAYBOY: Let's go back to the start of your career for a minute. Do you remember the first comic book you ever wrote?

LEE: It was a prose story in one of the Captain America books, a two-page story set in type. Nobody read those stories. That's why they let me do one. But you couldn't call a comic book a magazine and get the magazine postal rates unless you had two pages of type. One day I was hanging around filling inkwells and erasing pages for the guys, and someone said, "Hey, Stan, we need a two-page story." So I wrote one. And that was that.

PLAYBOY: You went off to the Army in World War II and wrote military pamphlets with an elite group that included Frank Capra, William Saroyan and Theodor Geisel. What's your standout memory?

LEE: That Dr. Seuss was slow. In the comic-book world, you live and die on your speed, but Geisel was slow. Most of them were slow. I was writing faster than all of them. One day the major who was in charge of our unit said, "Sergeant, will you work a little slower? You're making the other guys look bad." I wrote all these training films about things I had no knowledge of. I remember I did one film, The Nomenclature and Operation of the 16 mm IMO Camera Under Battle Conditions. What got the most attention, though, was something I wrote about venereal disease.

PLAYBOY: You wrote a sex manual?

LEE: No, they needed me to help the enlisted men avoid disease. They were always getting VD. So they had what they called prophylactic stations, little one-room buildings with green lights inside. After you'd had carnal knowledge of a female, you would go to the pro station and get disinfected in the most horrible way. My mission was to tell the troops to go to the pro station after they'd had sex. So I drew a little cartoon of a soldier. There's the green light. Over his head there's a dialogue balloon that says, "VD? Not me!" They printed a couple million of them. I figure we probably won the war based on that.

PLAYBOY: Is it true you continued to work for Marvel that whole time?

LEE: That's right. Whenever I was free I'd write something new. I bought a car with the money they sent me while I was in the Army. I used to pal around with a lot of the officers. Some of them were my best friends, majors and captains, even though I was an enlisted man. I wasn't supposed to pal around with them, so I'd wear an olive drab sweater so the rank didn't show. We went out and drank and had fun. But I was never a less than responsible driver.

PLAYBOY: Speaking of that, do you remember the moment you thought up the phrase "With great power comes great responsibility"?

LEE: The honest-to-God truth is I thought I made it up for Uncle Ben to say. But then somebody wrote to tell me Voltaire had said it in French a couple of centuries before. I never read Voltaire. I don't speak French. I just liked the way it sounded.

PLAYBOY: When did you first realize you'd created a worldwide sensation with your characters?

LEE: There were a lot of moments. We'd get letters from all over and then visitors, including some famous ones. I remember being visited by Federico Fellini. He came in and said he wanted to meet me. I'll never forget. I had a tiny office at the end of a long hall. I get a call he's coming and see Fellini walking toward me, accompanied by four of his assistants, all dressed the same in black raincoats, all in descending order of height. Fellini was the tallest, and behind him were the four others. It was the funniest sight. I wanted to talk about him and the movies he'd made, 8½ and all the others. He wanted to talk about Spider-Man. Years later he was nice enough to show my daughter around Italy and take care of her. It would have been interesting to collaborate with him. He would have been good with X-Men. Fellini and Magneto would have been an interesting combination.

PLAYBOY: In the next X-Men movie, the 1970s X-Men meet the modern-day team. Do you ever worry someone's going to screw up your original characters?

LEE: I don't even think about it. I know they'll usually come up with something interesting, and if they don't, something else will come up. The nice thing about stories is you can always find another angle that'll be good. To be honest, I let go a long time ago. I let go of these characters around 1972 when I

became publisher. I was never a real publisher because publishers are businessmen and I'm not. But as publisher, I stopped writing the books, for the most part. All these characters eventually find their way.

PLAYBOY: The Hulk has always been especially difficult. Even the popular 1970s TV show with Lou Ferrigno is more camp than classic.

LEE: They've tried a green Hulk and a red Hulk and a blue Hulk. Everybody tries something, but I think everybody does it wrong. In the last movie he looked pretty good, and the actor was pretty good. But they made him too big and started changing his color. It's such a simple thing. It's like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the way I conceived him. He's a scientist who turns into a monster. He hates the monster, and he wants to cure himself of turning into it. The monster hates the scientist and doesn't want to become that weak nothing kind of guy. He likes being the Hulk. To me, as a writer, I could play with that and come up with a million plots. For some reason, Hollywood keeps making the Hulk this big, crazy brute. One day somebody should go back to the basics.

PLAYBOY: Are you excited to see Avengers: Age of Ultron?

LEE: Excited? Sure. But I have to be honest. I don't have any idea who the hell Ultron is. He was a character developed after I stopped being involved in the Avengers story. I was asking some guys in the office who Ultron is, but then my phone rang and I got busy and never found out. Marvel introduced so many characters and strange situations, it's hard to keep track of them all.

PLAYBOY: True, but why haven't we created new superheroes? We still mostly rely on yours and a handful of others, such as Superman and Batman, to save the day.

LEE: Well, publishers don't need new ones now. They needed them when I was doing them. My publisher would say, "Hey, Stan, that last one sold very well. Dream up another one—or four—for me." Now they don't have to say that. All they have to say is "When are we going to find the time to make a movie out of Ant-Man or publish another edition of Silver Surfer?" We have plenty of material in reserve that audiences love. And you know Hollywood appreciates a sure thing. There aren't enough opening weekends or TV channels or bookstore shelves for all the titles Marvel alone plans to put out. It's not just Captain America, Fantastic Four, Daredevil and the rest. We have dozens to draw on, and fans are always asking, "Stan, when are they going to come out with a Black Panther movie?" Incidentally, I would love to see a Black Panther movie myself. I know they're working on one. But then fans will say, "What about Ant-Man? Or the Inhumans? Or the Annihilator?"

PLAYBOY: After decades of events such as Comic-Con and now your own Comikaze comic-book expo, you must get tired of geeky fan questions.

LEE: I enjoy the questions and always try to give a funny answer. For example, they'll say, "Who could win, the Hulk or Galactus?" I'd say, "It depends on who's writing the story." "What makes you work so hard and do all these stories?" I tell them greed. Even if I've heard the question 800 times before, I always try to give them an answer they don't expect. Like "What superpower would you want?" I say, "Luck, because if you have that you have everything." Actually, that one I believe.

PLAYBOY: You mentioned Ant-Man a minute ago. What's the status of the movie version?

LEE: It's coming along. [Editor's note: The film, directed by Edgar Wright and featuring Hank Pym, played by Michael Douglas, and Scott Lang, played by [Paul Rudd](#), is scheduled for July 2015.] What's terrific about Ant-Man is that he's small and can do a lot of things a normal-size person can't, but he's also incredibly vulnerable. The most important thing with any hero is he has to be vulnerable. If it's somebody who could never be hurt, that's no fun. One of the problems I always had with Superman was, how can I worry about him? You can't kill him, you can't hurt him. But with a guy as small as Ant-Man, there are so many things he can do, but every minute of his life he's in danger. There's this tension of thinking he'd better get big again fast. To give you another example, in the movies Batman has gotten more vulnerable in recent years, and it's made him more interesting.

PLAYBOY: Speaking of Batman, what was a night on the town like with your friend and Batman creator Bob Kane?

LEE: He was always late, first of all. We'd make a dinner reservation for 7:30, and Bob and his wife would get there at eight o'clock or 8:30. If we were half an hour late, they'd come half an hour later. It became a game. They were always later than we were. Then we'd sit down, and within a few seconds he'd say to the waiter, "You know who I am? I'm Bob Kane. I draw Batman. Look, I'll show you." And he'd draw a little Batman. He was happy being who he was. You can't fault it. He was never on time for dinner, but he loved Batman and loved being recognized for it, and we'd have a great time talking up these characters. I've had a lot of good times.

PLAYBOY: Has it been an easy life for you?

LEE: Life is never completely without its challenges. I have a new heart valve that was put in a couple of years ago. I have a touch of asthma. I get tired sometimes. But I haven't had a lot of angst. I mean, certainly early in my career, before *The Fantastic Four*, I struggled. I felt I was never going to get anywhere. Even afterward, I was embarrassed to say I wrote comic books for a living. I had a lot of shame about that. Even when I made a good living, my dad didn't think of me as a success. He was pretty wrapped up in himself most of the time. Some of that rubbed off on me. I was always looking at people who were doing better than I was and wishing I could do what they were doing—Steven Spielberg or a writer like Harlan Ellison, or even Hugh Hefner. Part of me always felt I hadn't quite made it yet.

PLAYBOY: Did you ever go to therapy?

LEE: Never had time, no. But if someone asked me for an evaluation of myself, I'd say I'm a particularly normal, levelheaded guy. I'm just a guy who likes what he does.

PLAYBOY: You started your career writing obituaries. Have you ever thought about what you'd like yours to say?

LEE: I know mine is already written. It's sitting there in the New York Times computers somewhere. It's all ready to go. You can't stop it. I've had a happy life. I don't want anyone to think I treated Kirby or Ditko unfairly. I think we had a wonderful relationship. Their talent was incredible. But the things they wanted weren't in my power to give them.

I'm always looking ahead, even at this age. You know, my motto is "Excelsior." That's an old word that means "upward and onward to greater glory." It's on the seal of the state of New York. Keep moving

forward, and if it's time to go, it's time. Nothing lasts forever. Hell, I'm 91 years old. If I have to go while I'm talking to you, I've had a long enough life. I'd hate to leave my wife and my daughter, but heaven knows it's beyond me. And I don't even really believe in heaven.

PLAYBOY: In the 700th issue of The Amazing Spider-Man, Peter Parker dies in a battle with Doctor Octopus.

LEE: Yeah, but he won't die. They'll bring him back, or it'll turn out he didn't really die. It's like Sherlock Holmes. I loved Sherlock Holmes when I was younger, and there were so many versions. He always made it out of every situation. You never run out of ideas.

PLAYBOY: Maybe there will be a [zombie](#) version of Spidey.

LEE: Zombies are puzzling to me. They're all the rage now, but I never understood them. Think about it: If I were dead and could come back to life, I wouldn't go around trying to kill people. I'd be saying, "Wow! I'm the luckiest guy in the world. Isn't this terrific? Hello, you wonderful person. Let's go out and have fun." If I go out in a flash but then somehow make it back, I'm not going to be angry. There's going to be a great big celebration.